



How Modern Planning Came to Calcutta

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ABSTRACT

The Calcutta Improvement Trust [CIT] was set up in 1911, the year the capital was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi. The coincidence suggests that the CIT was a sop offered to the city for its loss of status and official pronouncements hinted the same. However the story of how an autonomous Trust was set up to tackle urban squalor in the city had a long pre-history. Like all attempts at 'improvement' in the nineteenth century, Calcutta's case was one of overlapping concerns and this paper will discuss how the decision to ensure planning for Calcutta came about in the early decades of the twentieth century.

European discourse: The immediate provocation was the advent of the plague in India [1896]. Although Calcutta was marginally affected, pre-emptive legislation to tackle epidemics had already been put in place and the plague offered the provocation to implement these measures. European official and non-official consensus – in the writings and pronouncements of civil servants, engineers, doctors, itinerant authors etc. – were impatient with any collaborative efforts that saw Indians as partners.

Finance: One important theme throughout was the question of funding. Calcutta's history of improvement had failed to resolve the issue. The enormous outlay of capital needed to demolish and buy property made the Imperial government reluctant to make a commitment to any large-scale schemes. Financial devolution meant taking the Indian populace into confidence. On the other hand a loan underwritten by government would sidestep this commitment. This suited the authorities well. Thus the state control of land – an important principle of urban planning – was enshrined in the CIT's schemes. However it took a long time and a tussle within and without government to arrive at this principle and explains why despite the beginnings in 1896, the CIT was set up almost a decade and half later.

Indian responses: This was complicated and the best evidence comes from the period after the plans for setting up the CIT had been announced. However Indian responses to forcible quarantine during the plague had been violent and had rapidly taken on anti-colonial colors. At the heart of sanitary reform was state access to bodies and this move linked physical planning of places to bodily reform. Indian elites were in a dilemma since they sympathized with Victorian notions of order but they could hardly afford to endorse these moves since they were at loggerheads with the colonial state over other political issues.

KEY WORDS: Social geography, imperialism, medical history, nationalism, finance, improvement.